

Conference Abstract

The UWI Zoology Museum and Bioblitzing in Trinidad & Tobago: Mutual Benefits

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Abstract

In 2012, as Zoology Curator for the University of the West Indies Zoology Museum (UWIZM), based at the St. Augustine campus in Trinidad and Tobago, I ran the first ever bioblitz to be held in Trinidad. Since then, an event has been conducted annually. Each event is organised mainly by staff and students in The University of the West Indies (UWI) Department of Life Sciences alongside members of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club (TTFNC). A typical event would follow this basic format: choose a new location each year, find a basecamp, set up a search area (usually a 5 km radius circle), promote the event, organise survey teams, start surveying on a Saturday, invite the public along on a Sunday to get involved and then announce the results.

Over the years, the bioblitzes have been attended and/or assisted by more than 30 groups and organisations. These included long-established bodies such as the Asa Wright Nature Centre, the Pointe-a-Pierre Wildfowl Trust, and the Zoological Society of Trinidad and Tobago; government bodies like the Institute of Marine Affairs, the Forestry Division and the Environmental Management Authority; and newer, smaller groups such as Trinibats, Turtle Village Trust, Environmental Research Institute Charlotteville (ERIC), the Reptile Conservation Center Of Trinidad and Tobago and The El Socorro Centre for Wildlife Conservation (ECWC) (Fig. 1).



Figure 1.

Some of the organisations who have been involved with Trinidad & Tobago bioblitzes.

The way these groups contributed to the events varied from being basecamp hosts to providing animal encounter experiences, and from granting access to land and giving permits to providing expert wildlife surveyors. Organisations were usually approached by me with an invitation to join a bioblitz, depending on the needs and location of the event. Sponsors for the events were found by writing to local companies, approaching those who already had community funding programmes in place.

I left the role of UWIZM curator in 2019, but the Trinidad and Tobago Bioblitz continued and evolved. In 2019, it followed the same pattern as previous events: the organisers partnered with a local school for a basecamp and the usual participants surveyed and welcomed the public. However, in 2020 with the first COVID lockdown, they had to adapt and so changed the bioblitz into an event facilitated online by using the iNaturalist platform: [T&T Bioblitz 2020 Backyard Edition](#). At this stage, people were restricted to their gardens or streets so observation opportunities were limited, but nevertheless there were around 6,500 observations made of almost 1,400 species over one weekend in November.

In [2021](#), restrictions were still in place for large gatherings but people could travel more widely, so the same online format was repeated. Observations could be made in some of the locations of previous events, which led to 2,900 observations and just over 1,000

species. For 2022, the event stayed online but became the Inter-Island Bioblitz as it went regional with participants from Jamaica and Barbados being invited. Almost 600 people took part and recorded over 1,300 species. Finally, in 2023, the bioblitz returned to the original format and an in-person event was again possible; this continued into 2024.

The recording of results changed over the years. For example, the use of iNaturalist went from 9 observations in 2012 to over 6,500 observations in 2020. As I was no longer resident in Trinidad, I couldn't take part directly but though iNaturalist, I could contribute by identifying observations, as could many other international identifiers.

The majority of records made during the events were observations rather than the collection of specimens, but for some groups it was necessary to collect for further identification. Specimens collected were mostly terrestrial invertebrates, although sometimes roadkill and other specimens found dead during the events were also added to the UWIZM collections.

After each bioblitz, a large banner was produced showing a summary of the results (Fig. 2). These were displayed at subsequent events and also as part of other displays in the UWIZM. Likewise, the trails and quizzes made for the bioblitzes were often used during the rest of the year for school groups visiting the UWIZM.

Both in the lead up to a bioblitz and in the weeks following the event, the results are promoted in several ways: on social media (Facebook at first and later Instagram and Twitter), in national newspapers, on TV (usually getting a slot on a morning show), and through the TTFNC's Quarterly Bulletin, the final edition of the year being dedicated to that year's bioblitz. A T&T bioblitz website was made, which allowed us to collate all these outputs as well as access to the final reports for each event.

Bioblitzes are fantastic events that bring together naturalist experts and the public. They should be a part of any natural history museum's repertoire, helping to promote and popularise the museum, as well as often providing a first exposure of citizen science to people, which can lead to a lifelong connection with nature (Fig. 3).



Figure 2.

Banner for the Port of Spain 2016 Bioblitz. By Mike. G. Rutherford.



Figure 3.

Participants in the Icacos 2017 Bioblitz. Photo - Eileen Rutherford.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.